



GRACE, ENDURANCE, HOPE

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Romans 5:1-5

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Many of us are old enough to remember the groundbreaking work of Elisabeth Kubler Ross, who worked with dying patients. She wrote a book in which she named five stages of grief, helping us all to put a kind logical progression to grief that became a guide for many. When someone is in the process of dying, she wrote, grief has these five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Though her work has been helpful, in more recent years others caution that grief does not always follow an orderly pattern nor moves in a steady progression from denial to acceptance. Grief swings and loops; it sinks and rises; it goes dormant and then, unbidden, springs unexpectedly as tears that welling up without notice.

The Apostle Paul gives much the same kind of outline for the move from suffering to hope: “we boast in our sufferings,” Paul writes, “knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” Over the long haul, I think Paul is right much of the time. But not always. We have all known people who have instead been crushed by suffering. This Sunday afternoon we will open our sanctuary to another church needing more space for the funeral of someone who died by suicide...one whose suffering could not be endured and who had lost all hope.

And in a novel by Somerset Maugham, one of the characters offers this cynical, countervailing view of Paul’s neat diagram:



“It is not true that suffering ennobles character;” the person notes...
“happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive.”ⁱ

Three key words in today’s short reading warrant our attention. We begin with the word in the middle: Endurance.

Growing up, my brother, sister and I did not tend to go to our father for sympathy. Rigorous discussions and debates, yes; but tenderness in childhood and youthful ‘sufferings,’ no. Dad always offered the same admonition: “Buck up, Kim.” The thing is, if one of us got hurt, Dad would completely fall apart. When things went wrong, he was no help at all. Since it is Father’s Day, I’ll tell you one of our iconic “Dad stories.” We all have them, don’t we? Stories about someone in our family that just so perfectly sum that person up, they get told again and again. Ours was at my sister’s graduation from Emory University. It was a hot June afternoon in Atlanta when the five of us got into Mom’s car and drove up the circular parking garage with the families of 5,000 other graduates. We found a parking place. It was a long graduation in folding chairs on the lawn. Four hours later, we trudged, hot and sweaty, back to the car only to discover that the keys were in the ignition, the car was still running, and the doors were locked. I don’t think you can even do that anymore.

As we stood there trying to problem-solve, Dad just kept walking around and around, pacing and repeating, “It’s going to blow up. That car is just going to blow up. It’s going to explode!” And so it became the family mantra at every mishap large or small...we’d all just look at each other and start laughing and say: “It’s going to blow up!” Then we’d try to find a solution. It has always been a particular sadness to me that my father’s life ended in suffering from a rare illness; one of its side effects anxiety. He endured in his suffering, I suppose, but opportunities for character building and hope were not part the progression.

Still, endurance is so essential to human life we would do well to cultivate our capacity to endure. Last year, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church hosted a lecture

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and professor at New York University. He spoke about his new book, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are setting up a Generation for Failure*. Haidt believes our good intentions to excessively protect our children is actually making them less resilient. From playground equipment to shielding college students from controversial topics, we are not helping our children develop endurance.

The late Peter Gomes, professor and Minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard University, once preached about endurance to students soon to graduate. He described endurance as much more robust than mere survival. To those students raised and schooled for “greatness,” Gomes said: “Instead of seducing you all with notions of greatness and of your place at the head of the line, perhaps we ought to summon you all to ordinariness, even to adequacy, for that, it seems, is where care and attention are needed. . . .we need people,” he went on, “who are not waiting for their crescent moment in which to excel and to do a heroic act: rather, what we need are people who regard their daily life—the routine, the ordinary, the mundane—as the place in which they mean to do ordinary things extraordinarily well. . . .what is really necessary is something that will get you through when everything that is supposed to work doesn’t; something that will get you through when all else fails. That is what we call endurance,” Gomes counseled. “Instead of preparing you for “success,” we should be preparing you to cope with failure when things don’t turn out right...” We should be teaching “capacities for endurance.” Instead of the lifting up the image of the eagle, Gomes preferred to celebrate the camel. “Camels,” he said, “who will make it across the desert because they have what they require on the inside and will not quit.”

But endurance that relies only on “inner strength” is not enough. So Gomes offered what he called “a commercial for God.” Endurance, he said, is attached to “a belief, a conviction in something beyond the damning circumstances of [our] own reality.” Endurance comes when we know there is a justice beyond what can see; that, in our suffering there is more to life than suffering; that there is a future beyond these present circumstances. He pointed those students toward God, the One “who will keep you when all has failed you; to whom you will turn when you



have exhausted all of the alternatives. It is God,” Gomes continues, “to whom you will turn when you get that fateful diagnosis; it is God on whom you will call when the bottom drops out; and it is God on whom you will call when you pass through those seasons of doubt and despair, when life itself seems not worth living and you cannot remember the last victory; and it is God on whom you will call with your very last breath. . . .The secret to endurance, he ended, “is to place your fragile self in the conviction of God.”ⁱⁱ

In our Scripture reading, Paul places ‘endurance’ between grace and hope. Paul says God gives us access to grace through Jesus Christ, “this grace in which we stand” as he puts it. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says that in this passage grace is not so much a verb, God’s action on behalf of undeserving sinners. Instead, grace becomes a place. Paul’s metaphor seems to envision “grace as a room into which Jesus has ushered all who believe, a room where they now ‘stand;’ a place characterized by the presence and sustaining love of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Lucy Rose was a professor of homiletics at Columbia Theological Seminary who taught her students not only how to preach, but also how to die. Diagnosed in her late 40s with cancer, Lucy kept a journal. She chronicled her suffering, her fears of leaving her husband and young daughter, her self-doubts. But she also wrote of her faith. How it helped her endure...and provided visions that sometimes came as dreams and at other times were vivid, guiding images.

In her journal, Lucy recalls a recurring dream or vision. Each time she was in an antechamber of a huge throne room. There were double doors three stories high. The anteroom was gold and ornate and circular with a seat running along the wall from one doorway to another. One time, she was waiting to be ushered into God’s presence. She waited impatiently, anxiously. Then she crawled on her hands and knees, her face bowed in shame toward the throne room. A Voice said, “Come,” and she felt God pick her up and cradle her body racked by pain. Sometime later, she was again in the anteroom. She remembered there was a banquet hall nearby, so she tiptoed in, took a strawberry and ate it. A dilemma arose. There were no



wastebaskets, no cracks in the floor or walls where she could hide the green cap of the strawberry she had taken. She left it on a side table in the banquet room.

Then God's voice asked, "Lucy, did you eat this strawberry?" Lucy wrote in her journal: "Yes," I confessed. Then, it was as though God stooped way down and I was a child with no understanding. God asked me gently, 'Why did you eat so little?'"^{iv} This must be the grace in which we stand. The room that gives us access to God's presence and sustaining love. Love that fills us with faith enough to endure.

What, then, finally, of hope? Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner once had one of those dreams that seems so real it simply must be true. He dreamed he was staying in a hotel and was shown to a room he loved. It wasn't so much what the room looked like; in fact he could not even recall it clearly. It was the way room made him feel. He felt happy and at peace there, and that everything was as it should be. Then, in his dream, Buechner wandered off and went many places and had many adventures. He came back to the hotel but was given a different room. So he went to the clerk and explained that while he couldn't remember where the other room was, he wondered if he might have it again. The Clerk was very nice and said, yes, all he had to do was ask for it by name and he could go there whenever he wanted. So Buechner asked what the name of the room was. And the Clerk told him. The name of the room was Remember.

Buechner writes that there can be healing and peace in remembering that gives us hope to go on. "Hope stands up to its knees in the past and keeps its eyes on the future," Buechner said. "There has never been a time past when God wasn't with us as the strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom... To remember the past is to see that we are here by grace, that we have survived, endured, as a gift."^v This is the grace in which we stand. The room into which we are ushered, where we may wait and endure, hoping in the God who stoops down to us in love, asking, "Why did you eat so little?"

Amen.



ⁱ W. Somerset Maugham, **The Moon and Sixpence**, p. 47.

ⁱⁱ Peter J. Gomes, from his sermon on Trinity Sunday, “Things You Should Know About: Endurance” in **Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living** (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 298-303.

ⁱⁱⁱ N. T. Wright, **The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol X**, Romans (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 516.

^{iv} Lucy Atkinson Rose, **Songs in the Night: A witness to God’s Love in Life and in Death** (CTS Press, Decatur, Georgia, 1998), 36-37, 77.

^v Frederick Buechner, **A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces** (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1984), 2-3, 11.